

# MOSES ON THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION

*by*

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Reuben Ahroni, in whose honor these essays are dedicated, delights in telling of the times he has been invited to share his religious tradition with Christians around the world. Given such an open spirit and broadly ecumenical heart it seems only appropriate, therefore, to undertake a study of Judaism's central figure - Moses - as a symbol of authority for the New Testament writers. A considerable amount of material already exists relating to the wider question of how Moses functions in the New Testament. This study wishes to focus upon one text in particular - that of the account of the transfiguration of Jesus. In this story, Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus, who undergoes a change in appearance variously described as a "metamorphosis" (Mk 9:3; Mt 17:2) or as a "change in appearance" (Lk 9:29). What function does Moses, the legendary giant of the Old Testament, serve in this narrative?

The traditional response to this question, copiously evidenced in commentaries on the synoptic gospels, is that Moses represents Israel's torah tradition while Elijah symbolizes Israel's prophetic heritage.<sup>1</sup> As such, it is argued, both of Israel's major canonical traditions are invoked as witnesses to the truth claims manifest in Christ. We will begin by briefly considering this traditional association and then we will consider alternative proposals. Along the way this paper will evaluate the various synoptic accounts in order to determine how Moses is taken to function in each of them.

1. This traditional interpretation was reasserted by Moulton (1901, pp. 159-210) (*contra* the study by Bousset), who rejected a suffering and dying messianic interpretation. The position is represented by many recent commentaries. E.g., Taylor (1957, p. 390), Nineham (1968, p. 235), Filson (1971, p. 192), Hill (1972, p. 267), Beare (1981, p. 363), Harrington (1991, p. 254).

*Moses as Representative of the Torah*

There is certainly evidence to support the assumption that, for the writers of the synoptic gospels, Moses functions as the symbolic embodiment of Israel's torah. Not only do the writers refer directly to specific points of legislation commanded by Moses (e.g., Mt 8:4 and parallels on sacrifice; 19:7 and parallels on divorce; 22:24 and parallels on marriage and inheritance; Mk 7:10 on honor of parents). They also refer to the "book of Moses" or to the "law of Moses" itself (Mk 12:26; Lk 2:22; 24:44; Acts 13:39; 15:5).

However, neither Mark nor Matthew counterpoises the law of Moses over against the prophets. Of the five times that the synoptic writers set the two side-by-side, all occur in Luke/Acts (Lk 16:29-31; 24:27; 24:44 [which adds "and the psalms"]; Acts 26:22; 28:23). Luke alone pushes Moses forward as the symbolic presence of the torah by contrasting the law of Moses with the prophets, making it clear that he is reflecting the distinction between two different canonical sources of authority. This vested interest which Luke has in viewing Moses canonically is not apparent in either Mark or Matthew. The combined witness of Mark and Matthew likely reflects the common underlying assumptions of first century Judaism that a strict canonical separation between the torah and the prophets was not as of yet meaningful. It may have existed *de facto*, but Moses had not yet come to embody the torah as distinct from the prophetic corpus.<sup>2</sup>

A second argument against the thesis that Moses represented the torah while Elijah represented the prophets focuses upon the New Testament's employment of the figure of Elijah himself. In none of the texts which refer to the prophetic corpus in the New Testament is Elijah placed in a symbolic capacity. Elijah is recognized by the synoptic authors as being one whose return was predicted in the prophetic corpus (Mt 11:14; 17:10-12 and parallels). He does not, however, serve as the embodiment of Israel's prophets. In fact, the common witness of Mk 8:28, Mt 16:14, and Lk 9:19 clearly suggests the opposite. When asked who the people thought that Jesus was, the disciples respond, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still

2. The statement in Mat 11:13, that "all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came," attests to the blurring of distinctions between the social function of priestly torah functions and prophetic functions. A similar blurring of distinctions is evident in Jer 20:6, where Jeremiah accuses the priest Pashhur of having prophesied falsely.

others (Jeremiah or)<sup>3</sup> one of the (ancient)<sup>4</sup> prophets." Apparently Jeremiah might serve to represent the expected prophet; but not Elijah.

In the intertestamental period Elijah was remembered not as the quintessential prophet but rather as the object of a prophetic promise. Certainly Elijah was understood to have been a prophet (1 Kgs 18:22). However, post-exilic Judaism apparently showed less interest in Elijah as the *subject* of prophetic discourse than as the *object* of prophetic promise. This shift in interest from Elijah as prophetic *subject* to prophetic *object* is evidenced in the Septuagint by the manner in which it handles the phrase "Elijah the prophet." The phrase occurs only three times in the MT: 1 Kgs 18:36, Mal 4:5, and 2 Chr 21:12, and only in the last case does LXX leave it standing. In 1 Kgs 18:36 LXX omits the word "prophet" entirely. In the most important text relating to the person of Elijah in the intertestamental period, the reading "Elijah the prophet" in Mal 3:23 [MT] is rendered in LXX [4:5] by the more common "Elijah the Tishbite."<sup>5</sup> The translators of LXX were subtly suppressing Elijah's prophetic identity.

It would be overstated to suggest that Elijah was stripped of his prophetic status in the intertestamental period. His prophetic status is indeed reiterated in Sir 48:1. However, Sirach is witness once again to the fact that Elijah was remembered not for his prophetic status but rather for his wondrous deeds (48:4, enumerated in 48:5-9). In an interpretation of Mal 3:23, Sirach remembers Elijah as the one who, at the appointed time, is "destined to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury" (48:10). Similarly, 1 Mac 2:58 recalls the "great zeal for the law" evidenced by Elijah, which was understood to be the very reason for his assumption into heaven. Elijah had as much to do with the law as he did with prophecy; and similarly, Moses had as much to do with prophecy as he did with law.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that Elijah does not fulfill a representative capacity in the narrative of the transfiguration - the embodiment of Israel's prophetic tradition - adds support to the contention that Moses, too, fills no such representative capacity. Elijah does not represent the prophetic corpus, nor does Moses symbolically represent Israel's torah tradition.<sup>7</sup>

3. Mt 16:14.

4. Lk. 9:19.

5. For the designation "Elijah the Tishbite" cf. 1 Kgs 17:1; 21:17; 21:28; 2 Kgs 1:3, 8; 9:36.

6. Cf. the view of Moses as Qumran which, precisely in his capacity as law-giver, regarded Moses as the *Urpriphet*. The law was given "by the hand of Moses and the prophets" (Meeks 1967, pp. 171-74).

7. Carlston (1961, p. 237) also argues against such a representative capacity.

*Non-Synoptic References to the Transfiguration*

The only unambiguous non-synoptic reference to the transfiguration tradition is that recorded in 2 Pet 1:16-17. In this text Moses and Elijah are not mentioned at all in conjunction with the events of the transfiguration. Their absence here leads some to insist that both Moses and Elijah are secondary figures in the narrative of the transfiguration, and that neither was a part of the original tradition known to the author of 2 Peter.<sup>8</sup>

2 Peter does not preserve an earlier form of the tradition. It clearly is based upon the form of the tradition as reiterated and developed in the Matthean community.<sup>9</sup> First, the divine message delivered from the cloud according to 2 Pet 1:17 more closely approximates the Matthean tradition. Only in these two accounts does the voice refer to the transfigured Christ as the one "...with whom I am well pleased" (cf. 2 Pet 1:17 ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητὸς μου οὗτός ἐστιν, εἰς ὃν ἐγὼ εὐδόκησα with Mat 17:5 οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητὸς ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα).

Second, and more significantly, the connection between Matthew's narrative and the recollection of 2 Peter is demonstrated clearly in that precisely these two texts shift the emphasis away from the appearance of the two visitors and the transfiguration itself and place it upon the divine voice. Contrast this focus upon the divine voice with Mark's account, which attributes the fear experienced by the disciples to the events associated with Jesus' transfiguration itself, including the alarming presence of the two heavenly visitors. In Mark, Peter is afraid because he sees Jesus' transformed appearance and the two visitors standing beside him (Mk 2:6). Luke's account attributes the fear to the approach of the cloud (Lk 9:34). Only in Matthew is the fear experienced by the disciples attributed to the voice itself (Mat 17:6). The Matthean focus upon the divine voice is clearly reflected in 2 Pet 1:17; of the various events associated with the larger narrative pattern, all that 2 Peter recalls is the honor and glory which was bestowed upon Jesus "when

8. Some scholars, based upon Luke's reading (καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο συνελάλουν αὐτῷ οἵτινες ἦσαν Μωϋσῆς καὶ Ἠλίας), suggest that the original form of the tradition spoke of two anonymous "men" or "angels," who were only later identified as Moses and Elijah. Others suggest that the present narrative is a fusion of two originally independent traditions, one with roots in Palestinian Judaism concerning the witness of the two visitors, and one with roots in Hellenistic Judaism relating to the transformation of Jesus' appearance, void of the visiting personages (e.g. Lohmeyer 1922, pp. 188, 204-206).

9. Contra Fitzmyer (1981, pp. 194, 196), who argues that 2 Pet 1:16-18 reflects the Lucan narrative with its reference to "honor and glory" (τιμὴν καὶ δόξαν), which Fitzmyer connects to the δόξα spoken of in Lk 9:32.

that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory." Matthew's initial effort to shift the import of the event from the appearance of Moses and Elijah and from the transfiguration itself to the divine voice is completed in the tradition developed in 2 Peter.

Therefore, the lack of reference to Elijah and Moses in 2 Peter cannot be taken as reflecting an earlier form of the tradition in which Jesus was transformed alone, accompanied only by a voice or by two anonymous "angels."<sup>10</sup> Instead, it reflects the full development of interests already at work in Matthew, in which the appearance of the visitors is suppressed so that the voice itself can assume center stage.

The only other possible non-synoptic reference to the transfiguration tradition is very ambiguous. In 2 Cor 3:18 Paul uses language which may contain an oblique reference to the transfiguration. By referring to the "glory of the Lord" (τὴν δόξαν κυρίου) and to being "transformed" (μεταμορφούμεθα) into the divine image in a context comparing Moses' transfiguration on Sinai to the greater glory revealed in Christ, Paul may well have some form of the transfiguration tradition in mind.<sup>11</sup> If so, Paul is certainly using it for polemical effect. Because of Paul's interest in establishing Moses as an anti-type of the Christ, any reference to Elijah would be superfluous. Furthermore, the midrash which Paul develops on the tradition of Moses' veiled face in Exod 34:29-35 is itself a thinly disguised polemic. Most importantly, if Paul is making an oblique allusion to the transfiguration event in 2 Cor 3:18, his interest is a highly charged political appeal to democratize the experience of those superlative Jerusalem apostles. His insistence that "*all of us*" (ἡμεῖς δὲ πάντες) are being so transformed" as a "gift from the Spirit" may represent a frontal assault on claims by the Jerusalem leadership who base their exclusive right to power upon special unique experiences, such as that with the transfigured Christ. Perhaps this is why the allusion made by Paul to the transfiguration, if that is in fact what 2 Cor 3:18 presents, is so oblique. He avoids mentioning the event directly so as to defuse his opponents' arsenal, while at the same time coopting the language of their tradition for democratic purposes. If so, the allusion to the transfiguration made by Paul in 2 Cor 3:18 is an attack upon precisely the sort of polemical use made of the tradition by the Jerusalem leadership, as evidenced by 2 Pet 1:16-17. Assuming that Paul does know the tradition of the transfiguration and alludes to it in these verses, the version of the story

10. McGuckin (1986, pp. 9-15, 51-52) has argued for such a pre-Markan form of tradition.

11. Caird (1956, p. 291). See the rebuttal by Taylor (1957, p. 389).

known to him clearly contained the figure of Moses and furthermore clearly connected the story with that of Moses' own "transfiguration" in Exod 34:29-35.

*The Juxtaposition of Moses and Elijah*

The question of Moses' appearance with Elijah has been the cause of considerable debate, since the evidence for their juxtaposition elsewhere in Judeo-Christian tradition is minimal at best. The earliest direct witness to the idea of a double return of messianic figures is in Eth. Enoch 90:31, where Elijah and Enoch presage the coming reign. The only references to the return of Moses and Elijah together are in relatively late midrashim. In a midrash on Deut 10:1 (*Midr. Rab. Deut.* 3:17) attributed to Johanan ben Zakkai, the rabbi is said to have reported God's statement made to Moses: "When I send the prophet Elijah, both of you shall come together." A midrash on Psalm 43 (*Midr. Teh.* 42-43, in reference to Ps 105:26; Ps 43:3; and Num 8:2) refers to the return of two redeemers - the prophet Elijah (= house of Aaron), and the Mosaic messiah (= house of David).

Does the juxtaposition of Moses and Elijah in the transfiguration narrative represent a traditional association, which was independently cited by ben Zakkai in the next century? Or is it a novelty in the tradition, unattested prior to its appearance in the Synoptic accounts? Many doubt that the juxtaposition of Moses and Elijah in the transfiguration narrative can possibly reflect a traditional association in Jewish eschatological thought (e.g., Baltensweiler 1959, p. 72). However, several factors can be cited to support the traditional nature of their juxtaposition in the tradition underlying the transfiguration narratives. First, the traditional nature of the pairing of Moses and Elijah likely underlies the cryptic reference to God's two witnesses made in Rev 11:3-6. This text, which presents an interesting midrash on a cluster of Old Testament texts, relates the date formulae of Daniel 12,<sup>12</sup> the messianic symbols of the olive trees and lamp stands of Zechariah 4, together with language relating to Elijah and Moses. Verses 5-6 contain references to specific events in the lives of Moses and Elijah: Elijah calling down fire from heaven upon his adversaries (2 Kgs 1:9-16); Elijah bringing drought upon the land (1 Kgs 17:1-7); and Moses turning the water of the Nile to blood and striking the land with a wide assortment of plagues (Exodus 7-12). The two

12. The "time, two times, and a half a time" (i.e. three and one-half years or 42 months) of Dan 12:7 is represented by the 42 months or 1,260 days of Rev 11:3. The 1,290 days of Rev 12:11 represents an additional 30 days during which the final events will transpire.

witnesses of Rev 11:3 attests to a tradition in which Elijah and Moses stand together as God's two eschatological prophetic harbingers.

Second, in spite of persistent oversight, it has long been recognized that the association of Moses and Elijah in Rev 11:3-6 is in fact based upon their traditional juxtaposition in the Old Testament itself (Lohmeyer 1922, pp. 190-91). Mal 3:22-24 (Eng. 4:4-6), the *locus classicus* of Jewish eschatological hopes, not only promises the advent of the prophet Elijah (vv 23-24). It also directly links this appearance of Elijah to the figure of Moses himself (v 22). Moses is the servant of God through whom the divine torah is mediated (*zikkūr tōrat mōšeh ʿabdi*, v 22a), and Elijah is the one who will implement this law by reconciling parents and children (*wēhēšib lēb-ʾābōt ʿal bānīm wēlēb bānīm ʿal-ʾābōtām*, v 24a). Elijah, who is the "messenger of the covenant" (Mal 3:1), represents the very restoration of the law of Moses. As such, the two figures are integrally connected (Baltensweiler 1959, pp. 79-82).

Scholars have often commented upon the peculiar order - "Elijah with Moses" - which is reflected in the Marcan tradition (Mk 9:4). Rather than suggesting either that Moses was originally not in attendance on the Mount of Transfiguration or that Mark has consciously demoted Moses (McGuckin 1986, pp. 9-10), Mark's order may well be based upon the text of Mal 3:22-24 itself as represented in LXX. Due perhaps to a conscious effort to mitigate the harshness of ending with the note of a threat of *herem* in v 24b (Smith 1984, p. 342), LXX inverts the text, placing the reference to Moses *after* that of Elijah. Thus the order "Elijah-Moses" is not completely unprecedented, and is in fact represented in the Greek tradition of Mal 3:22-24, the text which would have served as the primary basis for the tradition reflected in the transfiguration narrative. Furthermore, the reference to the two witnesses in Rev 11:3-6 mentioned above is additional evidence for the ordering Elijah-Moses, as this is the order reflected in vv 5-6 (Carlston 1961, p. 238). Not only is the juxtaposition of Elijah and Moses evidenced in the tradition contemporary with the synoptic writers; the order of Elijah and Moses itself seems to have been a basic element of that tradition.

### *Moses as Paradigm of Continuity*

Before considering the multi-valent significance of the presence of Moses in the transfiguration narrative, we need to clarify the extent to which the relationship between Moses and Jesus is understood to be one primarily of continuity or discontinuity. Several studies emphasize the fact that Moses and Elijah serve principally as foils in the plot development: they appear with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration as anti-types of what Jesus truly is.

They demonstrate a negative feature against which Jesus is positively contrasted. Such a pejorative interpretation of Moses' presence is seen, for example, in G. Caird's theory that Moses and Elijah represent the failed order which Jesus is to avoid: bankrupt Jewish legalism (Moses) on one hand and the appropriation of nationalistic violence (Elijah) on the other. Both legalism and violence are rendered obsolete by Jesus' determination to follow the way of the cross and redemptive suffering. According to Caird, Moses and Elijah met with Jesus in order to wish him well in his radically new venture. They certainly knew nothing about what lay ahead for Jesus and had absolutely nothing to offer him in the way of advice, nor could they even keep him company on his pioneering journey. Moses and Elijah represented a dead-end away from which Jesus had to be warned.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, M. Thrall (1970, pp. 314-16) regards Moses and Elijah as foils for the presentation of Jesus, seen in their respective encounters with death. Moses and Elijah, argues Thrall, were representative of those few exceedingly righteous persons who had escaped death by being translated directly to heaven. Jesus, on the contrary, was set apart from them because of his victory *over* death, rather than an escape *from* it. Jesus was not just one more raptured righteous person. He was uniquely the messiah.

Certainly all three synoptic gospel writers present Jesus in the story in such a way that he is the fulfillment of whatever it is Moses and Elijah represent. Jesus' superiority over Moses and Elijah is made explicit in all three accounts. Peter's offer to make three booths is certainly portrayed as inappropriate and is accordingly censured by the voice which sets Jesus apart as the divine Son to whom the disciples are commanded to listen.

However, there is little in the respective accounts to suggest that Moses and Elijah serve as anti-types of the Christ. Mark attributes Peter's admittedly rash and impetuous desire to place Moses and Elijah on the same level as Jesus to his overwhelming terror, because of which he did not know what else to say (Mk 9:6); Luke suggests that it was due to Peter's crippling fatigue: he did not know what he had said because he was weighed down with sleep (Lk 9:32-33). Only in Matthew's account is Peter's response made in a rational frame of mind, and precisely here there is no note of censure, no note that he

13. Caird (1956, pp. 293-94). Caird's argument, that Elijah represents unrestrained violence, flounders in view of the fact that by the time of the New Testament writings Elijah himself had already to some extent become a renunciation of Zealot passion and the adoption of restitution through more peaceful means. Baltensweiler (1959, p. 82). As such Elijah is not a foil for Jesus but is rather a paradigm for his program of deliverance.



"did not know what he was saying" (Luke) or "did not know what else to say" (Mark). Thus none of the accounts censure Peter without providing a mitigating rationale for his gaffe.

Other than the designation of Jesus as God's Son and the command to listen to him, there is no evidence to suggest that Moses and Elijah are presented as anti-types and foils for Jesus. Jesus *fulfills* the hopes expressed in the presence of Moses and Elijah; he does not *vanquish* and *annihilate* them. Whatever symbolic function they have in the story, it stands in continuity with the presentation of Jesus, not in discontinuity with it.<sup>14</sup>

### *Moses as Eschatological Harbinger*

The reference to Moses and Elijah in Rev 11:3-6 to which we alluded above, as oblique as it may be, clearly places the tradition of the joint appearance of Moses and Elijah within the context of Jewish eschatological hopes. They are not simply representatives of the law and the prophets; they are rather the prophetic harbingers of God's eschatological reign.<sup>15</sup> The crucial question, however, relates to how the figure of Moses would have come to serve in such a capacity in intertestamental Judaism and thus in the New Testament. The elements of the biblical Moses tradition are like the filaments in a kaleidoscope. The function which Moses came to play in biblical tradition is as multi-faceted as is the mirror image of the kaleidoscope, which is in perpetual change depending upon how the bits of filament interact with a turn of the barrel. We can better understand the manner in which the figure of Moses functioned symbolically for the New Testament writers by breaking down the kaleidoscopic picture into its constituent parts. I wish to do so by suggesting five primary textual traditions from the Old Testament, as developed in intertestamental Judaism, which served as the filaments in the kaleidoscopic portrait of the synoptic Moses, and will evaluate the extent to which they helped shape the tradition presented in the transfiguration narrative.

14. Descamps (1963, p. 203) suggests that it is principally the books of John and Hebrews which stress the discontinuity of Moses and Jesus. Elsewhere the stress is on their continuity.

15. That Moses functions as an eschatological harbinger in intertestamental Judaism is granted by nearly all. A notable exception, however, is Baltensweiler (1959, p. 77) who denies that Moses and Elijah can possibly serve this role. Cf. Müller (1973, p. 183). Jeremias (1967, pp. 866-67) suggests that only in Jn 5:45 is Moses given a clear eschatological function. Otherwise his role is peripheral.

i. *The Prophet Like Moses*

The primary texture of the Moses tradition was provided by the promise of the coming "prophet like Moses" in Deut 18:15-18 which, when read in the light of the note of non-fulfillment in Deut 34:10, came eventually to be reserved for the singular eschatological prophet further promised in Mal 3:1 and 3:23. Certainly Deut 18:15 was not the sole constitutive text underlying the tradition. In fact, a significant strand of intertestamental Judaism developed a doctrine of the messianic Moses quite apart from reflection on the promise of a "prophet like Moses," focusing instead upon elements from the Exodus tradition. Rather than conceiving of the promised messiah as being accompanied by a "prophet like Moses," this tradition looked forward to a messiah who would himself be a "deliverer like Moses." There were thus two typologies at work in intertestamental Judaism: one a Moses/prophet typology, drawing its energy from the trajectory of Deut 18:15; and the other a Moses/deliverer typology, promoting Moses *himself* to messiah and drawing its energy from Exodus traditions (Jeremias 1967, pp. 859-63).

Because of this typological ambiguity, the debate raged over whether the coming reign of God would be heralded by a Mosaic prophet or whether the messiah would himself be a Mosaic deliverer. Further, whether this prophet/deliverer would be Elijah, Jeremiah or some other ancient prophet *redivivus*, or simply a Moses-like figure, or would indeed be Moses himself, was also the core of an interpretive conundrum. The issue was further complicated by the question of whether this prophet or messiah represented priestly or royal interests or both. The notion that two messiahs would herald the coming reign of God is already evident at Qumran: "until there shall come the prophet and the messiahs (pl.) of Aaron and Israel" (1QS 9:10-11). Two messiahs (one royal and one priestly) are clearly evidenced in later Judaism, as Tar. Song of Sol. 4:5 and Tar. Lam. 2:22 demonstrate: the messiah, son of David (associated with Moses)<sup>16</sup> and the messiah, son of Ephraim (associated with Aaron). Similarly, Tar. Jonathan refers to two messiahs - a Mosaic messiah who will come forth from the wilderness, and a royal messiah who will come from Rome.

These two basic typologies of Jewish eschatological reflection became so entangled by the time the synoptic tradition was fixed that it is impossible to

16. On the royal attributes applied to Moses in intertestamental Judaism, see Meeks (1967, p. 99) who argues that the coalescence of Mosaic and royal attributes underlay the Christology of John's prophet-king of 6:14. Cf. Porter (1963, pp. 8-9) who argues that Philo's conception of Moses as ideal king reflects biblical tradition.

separate them.<sup>17</sup> Both typologies underlie the messianic expectations of the transfiguration narrative. On one hand, Jesus is the new "prophet like Moses" to whom has been bequeathed the Mosaic status; the command addressed to the disciples to "listen to him" (ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ, Mk 9:7; Mt 17:6; αὐτοῦ ἀκούετε, Lk 9:35) confers on Jesus the authority attributed to Moses in Deut 18:15 (MT *ʿēlāw tišmāʿūn*; LXX αὐτοῦ ἀκούσεσθε). Jesus is the promised "prophet like Moses" who is heir to the status accorded Moses in Deut 18:15.

On the other hand, Jesus is designated as the messiah himself, to whom the Mosaic prophet bears witness. The present form of the Transfiguration narrative shifts the weight onto this second typology: the entire transaction serves the purpose of ratifying Peter's confession of Jesus, "You are the Messiah" (Mk 8:29; Mt 16:16; Lk 9:20). As such, Jesus is not simply the "prophet like Moses" who heralds the coming messiah. At a more significant level he is the messiah to whom the Mosaic prophet bears witness.

At two different levels, then, Jewish eschatological expectations underlie the figure of Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration. In the pre-Markan tradition, which drew more heavily on the Moses/prophet typology, Moses functioned as the prototype of the Mosaic prophet whose identity is now lodged in Jesus, the new "prophet like Moses." In the synoptic redaction, which drew more heavily on the Moses/savior typology, Moses functions as the "Mosaic prophet" himself who bears witness to God's saving messiah, Jesus. In both cases, however, it is clear that the figure of Moses is shaped by the eschatological expectations surrounding the appropriation of Deut 18:15 in intertestamental Judaism.

The role which Moses came to play in intertestamental Judaism resulted from the compilation and interaction of many different traditions. Undoubtedly Moses' reputation as Israel's quintessential intercessor (Jer 15:1), as well as the status later attributed to him as the one to whom were intrusted all the secrets of Israel's history from beginning to end,<sup>18</sup> were formative in the development of Moses' eschatological role. Eventually all prophecy was attributed to Moses, and the Pentateuch itself was understood as having a

17. The view that the mosaic prophet and the exodus messiah were one and the same was likely fostered by the liturgical practice of reading certain texts (namely Exodus and the Song of Solomon) in the synagogue on Passover in a strictly messianic sense (Bloch 1963, pp. 160-64).

18. Lohmeyer (1922, p. 189); Ramsey (1949, p. 110). Meeks (1967, p. 215) calls attention to the developing tradition associating Moses' ascent on Sinai to an ascent into heaven, during which Moses received the holy secrets.

prophetic function which bore witness to God's messiah. The primary shape of New Testament eschatological expectation, however, was ultimately determined by the trajectory of Deut 18:15 as filtered through Deut 34:10 and Mal 3:1, 23-24, and as forged in the fires of intertestamental and apocalyptic Judaism. The figure of Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration represents as of first importance this "prophet like Moses" who on one hand is the prototype for Jesus' own appropriation of the office of Mosaic prophet in preparation for the coming reign of God, and who on the other hand is the witness to the messianic claims of Jesus himself.

## ii. *Moses and Sinai Theophany*

In addition to the Moses/prophet typology of Deut 18:15, it is often argued that the presence of Moses in our narrative represents a Sinai/theophany typology which establishes Jesus as the new Moses of theophanic glory. This typology connects Jesus' transformed appearance on the mount with the similar "transfiguration" of Moses himself in Exod 34:29-35. The shining of Moses' face (*qāran ʿōr pānāw*, Exod 34:29) is often taken to be the obvious typological antecedent for Matthew's statement that Jesus' face "shone like the sun" (ἐλαμψεν...ὥς ὁ ἥλιος, Mt 17:2) as well as for Luke's reference to a change in the appearance of Jesus' face (τὸ εἶδος τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ ἔτερον).

The typological connection of Jesus' transfiguration with that of Moses was not a feature of the pre-synoptic or Marcan account, however, since Mark is especially uninterested in making any direct connection with Moses' own transformation. Whereas Moses' transformation was spoken of as the "glorification of the appearance of the skin of Moses' face" (contrast MT Exod 34:29 *qāran ʿōr pānāw* with LXX δεδόξασται ἡ ὄψις τοῦ χρώτος τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ), in depicting Jesus' "metamorphosis" Mark focuses exclusively upon Jesus' clothing, making no mention at all of his face (Mk 9:2b-3).<sup>19</sup> Matthew seems consciously to heighten the connection of Jesus' transfiguration with Moses' glorification by extending Jesus' metamorphosis from his clothing to his face, thereby echoing Moses' experience on his own Mount of Transfiguration. Similarly, Luke may be stressing the connection with Moses' glorification by his appeal to the vocabulary of "glory" itself. That Moses was glorified (*δεδόξασται*) on Sinai is echoed in the fact that

19. I take Mark's statement καὶ τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ... (9:3) to mean "that is, his clothing..." rather than "and in addition, his clothing...." In any event, Mark clearly makes no reference to Jesus' face in describing this metamorphosis.

Luke presents Moses and Elijah in their glory (δόξα) in preparation for Jesus' own display of glory (Lk 9:32b-33).

Two verbal clues may further link the story of Jesus' glorification to that of Moses in Exodus 34. First is the fact that the transfiguration is spoken of as a "metamorphosis" (μεταμορφώθη, Mk 9:3; Mt 17:2). Although this word is not used of Moses in the LXX rendering of Exod 35:29, it is used by Paul in 2 Cor 3:18 in a context which alludes precisely to the tradition of Moses' transfiguration. The verb μεταμορφοῦν is seldom used in Greek literature and is extremely scarce in biblical literature.<sup>20</sup> This scarcity of usage suggests that Paul's own use of the word results from a traditional association of metamorphosis with the glorification of Moses' face. Although Mark uses the term with no apparent reference to Moses' glorification intended, Matthew cannot resist the connection and makes it more explicit by heightening the reference to Jesus' face.

The second verbal connection is perhaps visible in the use of the verb συλλαλεῖν ("converse with") to establish the context for the transfiguration. Although the word is relatively scarce in the biblical tradition,<sup>21</sup> it is connected with the context of Moses' transfiguration (Exod 34:35, ἔως ὃν εἰσελθὼν συλλαλεῖν αὐτῷ). Precisely the same verb is used in all three synoptics to refer to the action between Moses, Elijah, and Jesus (E.g., Mk 9:4, καὶ ἦσαν συλλαλοῦντες τῷ Ἰησοῦ).

The pre-Markan and Marcan accounts of Jesus' transfiguration did not intend any typological connection with the story of Moses' glorification on Sinai.<sup>22</sup> However, because of certain verbal triggers (the use of μεταμορφοῦν and συλλαλεῖν) as well as the general symmetry of the experiences of Moses and Jesus, the other two synoptics may well have intentionally pursued the connection. To suggest more than this, however, must face glaring difficulties.<sup>23</sup>

20. Never in LXX except for Symmachus' translation of Ps 33:1 where he uses it in place of the more normal ἡλλοώσεν in the phrase ἡλλοιώσεν τὸ προσωπον αὐτοῦ. Otherwise, apart from the Marcan and Matthean versions of our story it occurs only in Rom 12:2.

21. Used only in Exod 34:35; III Kgs 12:14; Prov 6:22; Isa 7:6; and Jer 18:20.

22. McGuckin's theory (1986, p. 15) that the Sinai archetype was found precisely in the pre-Markan form, and was encountered by Mark's shifting from a Palestinian "shekinah focus" to a Hellenistic "metamorphosis" theme is certainly overdrawn.

23. For example, although the fear of the onlookers is mentioned in LXX of Exod 34:30 (καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν ἔγγισαι αὐτῷ), in Mt 17:6 (καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα) and Lk 9:34 (ἐφοβήθησαν δὲ ἐν τῷ εἰσελθεῖν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν νεφέλην), each attributes the fear to something completely different. Such differences ought not be minimized.

If the specific connection with Moses' transfiguration in Exodus 34 is tenuous, might there nevertheless be a more broadly conceived Sinai typology at work in the tradition of Moses' appearance at Jesus' transfiguration? The mountain setting itself is often taken to suggest a conscious application of a Sinai/theophany typology to the story of Jesus' transfiguration. The fact that both Moses and Elijah experienced theophanic revelations on Sinai/Horeb is taken by many to be the rationale for their presence on the Mount of Transfiguration. The best evidence for such a typological linkage is the fact that 2 Pet 1:18 interprets the mountain site as "the holy mountain" (2 Pet 1:18, τῷ ἁγίῳ ὄρει). However, such language is too general to be convincing, and certainly the reference in Mk 9:2 and Mt 17:1 to "a lofty mountain" (ὄρος ὑψηλόν) provides even less help. Such mountain settings have as much to do with eschatological drama as with any specific connection with Sinai. Furthermore, if there is any connection with a Sinai typology in the reference to "a lofty mountain" in Mark and Matthew, Luke certainly dissolves it. Luke's reference to "the mountain" whence Jesus goes to pray (9:28) leads the reader to connect this site not with Sinai but rather with the mountain of 6:12 which has no Mosaic connections. In fact, if the mountain represents anything for Luke, it is a place where Jesus can go for prayer in the midst of his encounter with the forces of evil. For Luke, "the mountain" is the place where Jesus encounters ominous powers of resistance and evil: threatening crowds (4:29), demonic possession (8:32), and betrayal (22:39-53). If there was any connection with a Sinai typology in the pre-Markan form of the tradition, it certainly was not exploited by either Mark or Matthew and was certainly suppressed by Luke.

The evidence for an intentional application of a Sinai/theophany typology to the transfiguration narrative is therefore negligible, at least in the pre-Markan and Marcan redactions. There may be some intended linkage to Moses' transfiguration in Exodus 34, especially in Matthew and Luke. But the question must remain open as to so-called "authorial intent." The connection to a more general Sinai typology, invoking the traditions of Moses' and Elijah's reception of revelation on Sinai, is even less certain. Of course, it must be acknowledged that subsequent readers would inevitably apply a Sinai typology to their reading of the narrative. That such a typology was formative

for the pre-Marcian form of the tradition<sup>24</sup> or was central to the synoptic intent, however, is highly doubtful.

### iii. *Wilderness Eschatology and Vicarious Suffering*

Another aspect of the Mosaic persona which developed in intertestamental Judaism was that of Moses as one who suffered vicariously on behalf of the people and whose suffering led to their good fortune. Some scholars suggest that this vicarious suffering typology is the key to understanding Moses' role on the Mount of Transfiguration: he comes in symbolic solidarity with the mission of Jesus which is unfolding in his prediction of the suffering and death of the Son of Man. Such a typological connection is heightened by the fact that all three synoptic authors locate the transfiguration account immediately following the first prediction of the passion and the call to the discipleship of cross-bearing (Mk 8:31-38 and parallels).

Understanding Moses as the prototypical vicarious sufferer is consistent with the Mosaic persona which developed in Palestinian Judaism. While Hellenistic Judaism appears to have been captivated by the development of a baroque Moses legend and fascinated by notions of Moses' apotheosis, Palestinian Judaism was much more interested in the significance which Moses' suffering and death held for the community of faith (Bloch 1963, pp. 130-40, 152-59). Moses' death in the wilderness was understood in one strand of biblical tradition to have befallen Moses on account of the sinfulness of the people.<sup>25</sup> As such, Moses represented the prototype of the suffering prophet who has come to meet with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration in this capacity (Pamment 1981, pp. 338-39).

Moses' death itself came to be regarded in Jewish tradition as having expiatory power, and this suffering persona was enhanced by the application of the language of Isa 53:12 to Moses, by whose merits others would enter the promised land of the reign of God.<sup>26</sup> Closely related to this notion of the

24. Donaldson's thesis (1985, pp. 142-3, 148) states that such a broad Sinai typology was formative in the pre-Marcian tradition but was absorbed into and transcended by a predominating Son/enhronement typology overstates his evidence.

25. Because of the priestly emphasis upon individual responsibility, the pentateuchal Priestly tradition understands Moses' punishment to result from his own actions. The Deuteronomistic emphasis upon the corporate catastrophe which comes upon the community, however, led to the notion that its leader was punished for the culpability of the people. These Priestly and Deuteronomistic themes cross swords in the pentateuchal traditions.

26. *Talmud Sotā*, 14a takes Moses' death as atonement for the incident at Baal Peor; Cf. *Midr. Rab. Deut* 2:9 on 3:27 (and reflecting upon 33:21).

vicarious nature of Moses' death, however, is the idea which developed in intertestamental Judaism that the body of Moses was taken up into the heavenly realm where it did not suffer corruption. The cryptic note in Jude 9 suggests that this feature of intertestamental "Moses piety" was a common feature in popular religious sentiment. Moses' corpse did not languish in its unknown grave, but reposed with God in heaven from whence Moses would return in the day of resurrection once again to lead the people from the wilderness into the promised land. The reference to Moses and Elijah in Rev 11:3-13 also bears witness to such popular lore, which took with utmost seriousness Moses' suffering unto death, but which understood it to be vindicated before his enemies.

Whether this vicarious suffering typology was formative for the pre-Markan form of the transfiguration narrative is once again impossible to determine. The fact that all three synoptics lock the transfiguration into the context of the passion prediction certainly indicates that Moses' vicarious death was on the minds of the redactors. Luke in particular seems to focus upon this typological expression. For Luke, Moses' mission on the Mount of Transfiguration is to discuss with Jesus his "exodus" to be accomplished in Jerusalem (9:31). If this "exodus" refers to Jesus' pending trial and death, as seems to be the case,<sup>27</sup> then Luke is intent on casting Jesus as the vicariously suffering prophet who, as all past suffering "Mosaic" prophets, must hurry onward to Jerusalem where any self-respecting prophet must go to die (11:47-50; 13:33-34).

#### iv. *Moses as Symbol of Victory Over Death*

The tradition that Moses' body was snatched from Satan and assumed to heaven, from whence he would return to lead Israel in the resurrection, has led others to stress another aspect of the Moses persona in its interaction with the transfiguration narrative. According to this understanding, Moses does not simply represent the prototypical suffering prophet standing in solidarity with Jesus' own mission. Rather, he represents one who himself endured the sting of death and rose victorious over its worst assault. This emphasis has been the focus of those who have argued that the transfiguration narrative is itself a misplaced resurrection account of Jesus.

The issues involved in this debate are too detailed to rehearse here, but the debate focuses upon whether the radiant glory of the transfigured Christ

27. The term *exodos* is often used in contemporary literature to refer to one's death. Cf. Wisd Sol 3:2; 7:6; Test Napht 1:1; 2 Pet 1:15.



is intended to elicit Christ's parousial glory or rather his resurrection glory. Those who stress the traditional focus upon parousial glory understand Moses in terms of his eschatological function. Those who stress the focus upon resurrection glory understand Moses in terms of the elements of intertestamental Judaism which spoke of his own resurrection.<sup>28</sup> In all likelihood the distinction between resurrection and parousial glory is overdrawn. The debate tends to focus upon a strict commitment to redaction critical principles on one hand (resurrection) and to a defense of the historical integrity of the legend on the other hand (parousia). As both interests capture less attention today there is naturally less passion generated in resolving the issue.

What does seem clear is that Moses' linkage with Elijah presents him as one who in some way indeed represents the transcending of death. The common synoptic context links Jesus' fate not simply to his pending suffering and death but also to his resurrection ("...and after three days rise again"; Mk 8:31 and parallels). Several recent commentators suggest that when Luke presents Moses and Elijah as conversing with Jesus about his "exodus" to be accomplished in Jerusalem he is not limiting their discussion to Jesus' demise; rather, he is speaking in a broader sense of the entire movement of holy week, including Jesus' resurrection and ascension, which also is effected in Jerusalem according to the Lucan tradition (24:50-52; Acts 1:6-12).<sup>29</sup>

#### *v. Moses as One Who Did Not Taste Death*

Those who argue that Moses represents the eschatological prophet on the Mount of Transfiguration suggest that the proper linkage with the redactional framework is with Mk 8:38 and parallels (the coming of the "Son of Man"), since here the question relates to Christ's parousial return. Those who argue that Moses represents the suffering prophet find the key linkage to be with Mk 8:31 and parallels (Jesus' pending suffering, rejection, death and resurrection), as do those who argue that Moses represents the resurrected and vindicated servant. The most exotic dynamic of the Moses tradition as applied to the transfiguration narrative, however, is the theory that Moses represents not one who simply suffers, nor one who transcends death through resurrection, but rather one who avoids the sting of death entirely by being raptured alive into

28. Those who argue for the "misplaced resurrection account" theory, which was articulated in its classical form by Bultmann, include Carlston (1961); Thrall (1970); and McGuckin (1986). Many oppose the theory. For a systematic rebuttal, see Stein (1976).

29. E.g., Fitzmyer (1981, p. 800); Johnson (1991, p. 153).

heaven. Those who argue that Moses here represents the divinely translated hero who escapes death find the redactional linkage to the statement in Mk 9:1 and parallels which speaks of some "standing here who will not taste death." Moses and Elijah, both of whom were raptured alive into heaven, represent the confirmation of the promise that some standing there would not taste death before the reign of God breaks in.

There are two major reasons underlying the argument that Moses represents one who has not tasted death. First is his association with Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. Elijah was known not simply as the eschatological prophet, but also as one who was divinely translated alive to heaven. Second is the promotion in intertestamental Judaism of Moses as one who, more than dying or even being raised from the dead, transcended death entirely by his own divine translation to heaven.

The major discussion in this regard focuses upon the extent to which the tradition of Moses' heavenly rapture became a sufficiently normalized part of intertestamental Judaism early enough to have become a fixed part of the Mosaic persona available to the synoptic authors. The New Testament texts to which we have referred know only of Moses' death and subsequent exaltation. There is no evidence in the New Testament itself, including the transfiguration traditions, which unambiguously attests to the belief that Moses did not die but was translated alive to heaven.

The evidence for such a development in intertestamental Judaism has often been laid out and scarcely needs to be rehearsed. 2 Esd 6:26 certainly refers to a tradition that some were "taken up, who from their birth have not tasted death." A few rabbinic texts likewise allude to Moses' bodily rapture into heaven<sup>30</sup> as does Josephus, who is apparently the earliest to do so (*Ant.* 4:326). The application of such texts to the transfiguration account has its recent defenders, notably U. Müller and J. McGuckin.<sup>31</sup> Since it is generally argued that the tradition of Moses' ascent to heaven was fostered by Hellenistic Judaism, Müller reads the transfiguration tradition as a Hellenistic narrative and interprets Moses and Jesus in terms of the Hellenistic *theios aner* or "divine man." For Müller, Moses and Elijah represent Hellenistic apotheosized gods/heroes in the heavenly circles before whom Jesus is presented as part of a three-stage enthronement pattern. Müller argues that already Mark was thoroughly Hellenized and so understood Moses and Elijah

30. E.g., the midrash on Deut 34:5 (*Sifre Deuteronomy* 357:10). For the texts and their evaluation, see Jeremias (1967, p. 855).

31. Müller (1973); McGuckin (1986); Cf. Meeks (1976, pp. 205, 209); Thrall (1970, p. 314).

in such terms.<sup>32</sup> Trying to avoid the problem of reading Mark as a Hellenistic document, McGuckin argues that the tradition of Moses' translation to heaven is not a result of Hellenistic Judaism, but results from impulses within Palestinian Judaism itself. Josephus, argues McGuckin (1986, pp. 16, 40, 46-47), reflects older ideas already at home in Palestinian apocalyptic Judaism.

Most scholars, however, subscribe to the more balanced position articulated by Jeremias that, although Josephus and a few rabbinic texts refer to a developing tradition concerning the divine rapture of Moses, the texts are of sufficiently late date and paucity as to suggest that the New Testament's silence on the issue is due to a general unfamiliarity with the tradition. Jeremias (1967, p. 855) admits that the transfiguration account *may* possibly reflect such a tradition, but does not consider it likely.

### *Summation*

We have considered a number of issues relating to Moses' appearance on the Mount of Transfiguration and some possible typologies underlying the nature of Moses' function in that narrative: the eschatological prophet, the transfigured hero, the vicarious suffering one, the resurrected leader, and the divinely translated *theios aner*. Each of these typologies has definite rhetorical and redactional links to the present form of the tradition: the eschatological model keys on Mark 8:38 and the coming reign of the Son of Man. The transfigured hero keys on language relating to the metamorphosis of Jesus' own person, especially the reference to his face in Matthew and to his glorification in Luke. The vicarious sufferer rests upon the link to Mk 8:31 and the language of Jesus' pending suffering as the inevitable goal of his prophetic ministry. The resurrected leader also is linked to Mk 8:31 and the focus upon Christ's resurrection. The divinely translated *theios aner* focuses attention upon Mk 9:1 and the promise that some will not taste death.

Undoubtedly all of these typologies have left their interpretive mark upon the tradition of the transfiguration. It seems clear, however, that some of the typologies are formative for the tradition itself whereas others represent secondary levels of reading and interpretation. Primary for the pre-Markan form of the narrative was Moses' function as the eschatological prophet. Significant for the story in its synoptic redaction was the symbolic presence of Moses as the suffering prophet - particularly for Luke - and as the resurrected messiah. Barely audible among these typologies is that of Moses

32. Müller (1973, pp. 183-87, 190-91). For a rebuttal of the application of Hellenistic *theios aner* categories in the New Testament see Donaldson (1985, pp. 139, 146-47).

as the transformed and glorified one associated with the Sinai theophany. It may be hinted at in Matthew and perhaps more yet in Luke, but it does not seem to have been formative either for the pre-Markan tradition or for Mark's narrative. Absent entirely, I would argue, is the presentation of Moses as the divinely raptured saint, whether in terms of the Hellenistic *theios aner* or as the reflex of Palestinian apocalyptic Jewish traditions. Evidence is simply lacking to suggest that the synoptic accounts found this paradigm either meaningful or, more likely, in line with their understanding of normative Judaism. It undoubtedly influenced the manner in which the text was later read, especially when the text was read in the light of the promise that "some would not taste death." But such a reading presents more an imposition upon the text than it does an interpretation of the text.

This study has cut a rather winding path through a very convoluted tradition complex. Hopefully it has demonstrated the complexity of how the figure of Moses came to function in intertestamental Judaism. Hopefully it has also demonstrated the literary creativity of the synoptic writers who took this multi-valent persona into their texts and blended several major typological interests in order to flesh out their understanding of the New Moses in their midst.

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